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ABSTRACT

A conception of the self system is needed for studying personally involving beliefs and attitudes, particularly to interpret research findings that show differences in cognitive processing and action as a function of varying levels of involvement. Different levels of involvement are associated with different structures of attitudes and beliefs, as well as ratings of confidence, subjective certainty and personal importance. Different attitude structures associated with low or high involvement lead to specific predictions about individuals' construal of events, evaluations of communications, and the likelihood of attitude change. By understanding the structures that compose the self system, different strategies for change are indicated, depending upon the degree of personal involvement, relationships with the communicator, the discrepancy of the communication from the person's attitude, and the ambiguity of the outcome. (Author/NRB)

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Involvement of Self in Cognitive Processes

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With a title this broad for a short presentation, I had best outline the major points before touching on each briefly.

First, a conception of the self system is needed as the framework for studying personally involving beliefs and attitudes.

Second, research findings on cognitive processes and action sequences require operational analysis of degree, levels, or gradations of involvement.

Third, varying degrees of involvement are reflected in differential attitude structures, as well as ratings of confidence, subjective certainty and personal importance.

Fourth, differential degrees of involvement lead to different predictions about the individual's construal of attitude-discrepant events and about the likelihood of attitude change.

Needless to say, research documentation has to be compressed into references. The research literature is reviewed in the forthcoming Nebraska Symposium on Attitudes and Values (Sherif, 1980). I will also be discussing the self system more explicitly tomorrow in a presidential address to Division 35.

A Conception of the Self System

Like it or not, there really is no theoretical background for conceptualizing a person who becomes more or less involved in ongoing events other than a psychology of self. [The terms "involved" and "involvement" appeared in the psychological literature in a section of Sherif's Psychology of Social Norms (1936) headed "involvement of the ego"--a term he used interchangeably with self. Sensing psychology's love-hate relationship with both of those terms, Sherif and Cantril (1947) later expressed their wish that the concept could be referred to by a term as

neutral as "X." Essentially, we are in the same predicament 33 years later when we refer to "personal involvement," rather than to ego involvement or involvement of self, for these terms are equivalents.]

The recent revival of the self in social psychology after years of neglect (e.g. Markus, 1977; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; McGuire et al., 1978, the various authors in Wegner & Vallacher, 1980; Greenwald, 1980) is one exciting sign of social psychologists' renewed preoccupation with central problems in social psychology. Throughout the history of our field, a conception of self has offered the best opportunity for working through what F. H. Allport (1961) came to regard as the "master problem" in social psychology, viz. how to conceptualize the relationships between the individual and the social order, or disorder--in short, the human social environment.

Recognizing that the human individual is neither an isolated feral child nor a carbon copy of the social environment, Sherif and Cantril (1947) conceived of the self system as a constellation or system of psychological relationships with one's body and the physical and social environment, formed as a consequence of interactions during development, and centered on the early experiences of "I," "me," and "mine," including one's name and gender. The system accumulates through continuing experiences that relate the individual in more or less stable fashion with varied aspects of the social environment where that individual functions, as well as with the "I," "me," and "mine" as objects of awareness. That social environment is much more varied and complex than simply "other individuals," important as they are, for it includes definable groups and their relationships, criteria for status, social norms and values; social objects, locations and technologies; institutions, systems of belief or ideologies, etc.

Involvement refers to the implication of a part of the self system in ongoing processing of a situation, either because the individual is preoccupied upon entering the situation or because part of the self is aroused by events in the situation, whether the individual is aware of it or not. As much recent work shows (Wicklund & Frey, 1980), heightened awareness enhances the salience of a self-object relationship. It follows that there is nothing absolutely fixed about personal involvements, and that their levels may vary from situation to situation.

Recent conceptualizations of the psychological relationships composing the self have used the term F. C. Bartlett (1932) borrowed from Head, the schema concept (e.g. Markus, 1980). This term has the advantage of making contact with the vital work going on in the psychology of cognition, utilizing the schema concept (e.g. Neisser, 1976). Further, the concept denotes cognitive structures linked both with the properties of the environment and action sequences, an emphasis somewhat lacking in social psychology, though prominent in that part of developmental psychology stimulated by the work of Piaget (1954). The disadvantage in the schema term is that it does not by itself handle the demonstrable effects in cognitive processing of schemata more or less involving to the individual. The possibility that self-related schemata may have special properties can be gleaned by a quick summary of research findings comparing greater and lesser involvement. Owing to discontinuities in research on self, the following findings are documented by recent confirmations and earlier reports, some as long as forty years ago:

Higher involvement is associated with more consistent behavior in line with self descriptions (Allport, 1943; Bem & Allen, 1974); quicker response time, greater confidence or certainty in one's responses (Klein &

Schoenfeld, 1941; Markus, 1980); better recall (Cartwright, 1956; Smith & Jamieson, 1972); greater selectivity in recall, though not necessarily or invariably selectivity favoring what is acceptable and enhancing to self (Bartlett, 1932; Wallen, 1942; Kamano & Drew, 1961; Spiro & Sherif, 1975); the use of fewer categories in social judgments (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, 1980); more striking contrast effects in judgment and a narrower range for assimilation of discrepant events (Sherif, 1980); a lowered probability of attitude change toward new outlooks, but a greater likelihood of polarization in the direction already acceptable (Doise, 1978; Sherif, 1980), fewer agreements when agreement is requested of discussants with different attitudes (Sereno & Mortenson, 1969); more frequent statements of intentions to act in line with measured attitude, and more frequent actions in line with those attitudes (Sherif, 1980).

These diverse findings comparing greater and less involvement do not represent simply the presence or absence of schemata. They suggest the need for defining sub-classes of schemata composing the self. Can the attitude concept serve to designate this sub-class?

A Needed Concept of Attitude

In order to do so, we have to distinguish sharply between the concept attitude and an individual's stated opinion or ratings. An opinion or a rating may indicate an attitude, but it also may be simply a social judgment rendered on the spur of the moment at someone's request. For a variety of reasons, it is essential that we define attitude and measure attitude in ways demonstrating some stability and some relation to behaviors in actual social situations. Otherwise, we will continue in the absurd state of affairs which led Converse (1970) to talk about "non-attitudes," and Peterson and Dutton (1975) to propose the following earth shaking proposition: An individual's behavior in situations including a possible attitude object will

not be influenced by the attitude if he or she has no attitude toward it.

Therefore an attitude may be defined as a psychological structure or schema which relates the individual with some degree of stability to a domain of social objects and specific representatives therein, cognitively, affectively and motivationally, through categorizations of that domain that are also evaluative, through beliefs about and attributions to members of that domain which are selectively biased for or against, positively or negatively, toward or away from objects in different categories (Sherif, 1980). Such a definition includes the possibility that some attitudes will be more involving than others.

It follows that an attitude includes categories of objects, beliefs about them and attributions to them that are acceptable to the individual and that are objectionable to the individual. If so, an attitude cannot be adequately assessed solely through endorsements or agreements. Since evaluative decisions and reactions are not all simply binary, it is important that the opportunity be given for the individual to accept, reject, or do neither. When that option was given in research over the last 30 years, fascinating relationships were found between the scope of latitudes that are acceptable, objectionable and toward which the individual is noncommittal or, if you prefer, uncertain, but not necessarily neutral (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Sherif & Sherif, 1969; Sherif, 1976, 1980).

The Structure of Attitudes Varying in Degrees of Involvement

Contrary to an early hypothesis, we have not found systematic variations of any special interest or significance in the scope, range or latitude of acceptance (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965). [We had expected to, misled perhaps by common sense language that designates people as narrow-minded on the basis of what they accept. Of course, there are differences

in the latitude of acceptance from person to person. Assuredly it makes a difference what positions and beliefs a person accepts. But the scope or latitude of acceptance by individuals upholding widely different positions and beliefs does not appear to vary systematically.]

Using two quite different techniques (the Own Categories method and the Method of Ordered Alternatives) we have found the following relationships among the latitudes of acceptance, rejection and noncommitment for highly involved, moderately and less involved individuals:

The higher the involvement, the smaller the latitude of noncommitment, which all but disappears for extremely involved individuals.

When the attitude domain is bipolar, as in a controversial issue, the higher the involvement, the wider is the latitude of rejection, relative to the combined widths of (or frequencies in) the latitudes of acceptance and noncommitment. On controversial issues, the latitude of rejection covers more than half of the object domain for highly involved individuals.

These relationships are not confined to persons adopting extreme positions on an issue. On bipolar issues, some individuals accepting moderate positions or positions amounting to total uncertainty, reject all other alternatives, including both extremes and other moderate positions (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). When the objects to be evaluated are not bipolar, a large latitude of non-commitment indicates low involvement, regardless of what is accepted.

These relationships between attitude structure and degree of involvement are found for persons accepting the same positions; for persons matched on educational, socioeconomic and national background; for adolescents and adults; for individuals with the same reference groups, but observably different relationships to them; and for individuals with the same membership groups, but differential status in them (Sherif, 1980). As suggested by the

latter comparisons, the independent confirmation for degree of involvement in much of this research has been prior actions, public commitments and membership or psychological reference to groups with known stands on the issues studied. The preliminary study of individual's reference persons, reference groups and reference categories in social life has a great deal to commend it as a means of ascertaining what the individual is likely to be involved in. In the interests of parsimony, it is surely preferable to an idiographic study of each individual. Further, such preliminary study is congruent with the use of the schema concept.

In similar vein, the only available evidence on personal consistency in high involvement across several issues pertains to attitudes related to the ideology of the individuals' reference groups. There is a great deal of evidence for significant differences in the structure of the same individuals' attitudes on ideologically unrelated issues (Sherif, 1980). [Therefore, a search for correlates in personal dispositions or abstractness-concreteness, which may well be found, has to deal first with the individual's allegiances to persons, groups and their belief systems, including family, friends, church, etc. as well as political groups, for which some reserve the term ideology.]

Reactions to Attitude-Discrepant Events

These systematic variations in attitude structure with different levels of involvement are essential to theorizing about reactions to attitude discrepant events, especially to assimilation-contrast effects in social judgments when acceptable positions anchor the individual's construal of the situation. Despite what you may have read in some published literature, it is untrue that <u>only</u> contrast effects, or <u>only</u> assimilation effects, or that neither, have been demonstrated in social judgments relative to the person's acceptable latitude. In fact, both have been demonstrated for

individuals who accepted the same positions, whose only background differences were reported activities related to the issue, but who varied in degree of involvement, as indicated by their latitudes of rejection and noncommitment. [For example, the same moderately opposed message on abortion was assimilated across the scale midpoint toward their own position by less involved individuals, but contrasted to less than 2.5 cm. from the extreme opposite end of an 11 cm. scale by highly involved individuals accepting the same positions, which were pro-abortion. The difference between means for more and less involved individuals rating the same message was 3.7 cm., i.e. over one-third of the scale length. Strongly anti-abortion advocates similarly showed a contrast effect (Kearney, Note 1).]

Briefly, the theory is that, to the degree that the individual is involved in acceptable positions, the range in which discrepant events are assimilated to them is narrower. Contrast effects exaggerate the discrepancy of events increasingly outside of that assimilation range (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965). Assimilation appears readily within the latitude of acceptance and latitude of noncommitment. The range of assimilation is increased when the situation, the message or the consequences of the message are more ambiguous, and when the communicator is highly prestigeful, particularly if the communicator is a person of high status in one's reference groups. Beyond that range, contrast effects in judgment appear, the individual does not like the event or message, and the prestige of a communicator is unlikely to change that dislike.

Attitude Change

Since, in my view, most laboratory studies of attitude change have not found attitude change, but rather rating variations within acceptable

latitudes, I will devote these final remarks to clarifying the record. The theoretical statements offered in Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall (1965) were intended to clear up confusion in the literature by "examining the research conditions" in which no change, some change or a great deal of change in one direction or the other occur (p. 188). That examination made it quite clear that in older studies the greatest changes were reported when involvement was demonstrably low, and the fewest and smallest changes when involvement was high. It did not show, nor would the theory predict, that "increased involvement would invariably reduce persuasion" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, p. 1923). Since the same article also said the theory "seems always to predict greater resistance with increased issue involvement" (p. 1917), it is important to set the record straight: it does not. We did write that "susceptibility to change decreases with increasing involvement in own stand" (p. 243), but that statement was followed by predictions about when involved persons would change that preclude blanket conclusions based solely on level of involvement.

Very briefly, the theory proposed that attitude-discrepant events, including messages, are construed relative to the latitudes of acceptance, rejection and noncommitment. Events falling within the latitude of acceptance or noncommitment, when combined with potent sources (i.e. high in status in one's reference groups) or environmental conditions conducive to uncertainty, may lead to attitude change within a fairly brief time span. Increasing change is predicted with increasing discrepancies from the individual's most acceptable positions within that range. More involved individuals have narrower latitudes of noncommitment, but all but the most active, committed partisans exhibit some noncommitment and are open to some change. Among active partisans on a social issue, rejection extends into the same side of the issue they accept. Therefore, the range within

which an attitude-discrepant event or message can influence them is narrow; but it is there. Like Petty and Cacioppo, the theory predicted that higher levels of involvement enhance the importance of message content and minimize the importance of who says it.

The theory predicts, therefore, that the probabilities for attitude change following attitude discrepant events form a set of inverted-U shaped curves for individuals with differing levels of involvement (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). Relative to what they accept, the probabilities for change increase linearly with increased discrepancies over the assimilation range, but decrease sharply to no change as the discrepancies fall deeper within the latitude of rejection. Because the range for assimilation is narrower with high involvement, the probability level does not reach the height possible for the less involved people, and the inverted U inflects downward at smaller discrepancies than the curve for less involved people. In addition, the theory also implies the possibility of attitude changes of various kinds, for example changes by broadening or narrowing the latitude of noncommitment and by broadening or narrowing the latitude of rejection, which may change the assimilation range.

It is possible that such changes in the latitudes of noncommitment and rejection occur in the long-term attitudinal changes which social psychologists so seldom study. In order to explore such changes, we will have to supplement laboratory studies confined to an hour with the study of individuals whose level of involvement and attitude structure we can specify, rather than assume. We cannot make statements about what occurs within some "normal range" of involvement without studying those attitudes in which individuals are deeply involved. And most certainly we cannot

conclude that highly involved individuals never change. The flaw in a theory of a "totalitarian ego" which resists any change is that the discrepant actualities of life cannot always be ignored or minimized, as they sometimes can in memory.

One of the conspicuous phenomena of our recent past and of the present is the banding together of like-minded people facing highly discrepant events, with the intent of changing social realities for themselves and for other people. While ten years ago, the more prominent among these would have included movements toward civil rights, black power, against the war, for improving women's status, and gay rights, today the counter-movements are equally prominent. For example, evangelical christians are reborn as politico's, something the Rev. Jerry Fallwell preached against for twenty years but now leads, and other activisits for anti-abortion, anti-ERA, anti-gay, pro-military causes, and national and racial chauvinisms flourish. We will be seriously misled if we think that partisans on either side of these controversies expect to or will change each other. They want to change laws, policies, the Constitution. We are already seeing many less involved individuals becoming more involved, one way or another by the partisan activity, and changing. Let's do our best to develop a social psychology of attitudes and beliefs that will help in understanding what is going on.

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